Women in the Priesthood: Questions and Answers

With an Introduction and Chronology of Related Events

Prepared by:

Emily C. Hewitt
Candidate for Holy Orders, the Diocese of New York; candidate for the Th.D., Union Theological Seminary, New York City.

The Rev. Suzanne R. Hiatt
Deacon, the Diocese of Pennsylvania; Member of the Faculty, Consortium of Episcopal Seminaries of the Northeast.

Introduction

The question of the ordination of women to the priesthood in Anglicanism and specifically in the American Episcopal Church is not new. As early as 1948, a World Council of Churches study of women in the church observed:

> Churches of the Anglican tradition . . . have had probably the most agitated minds, and undertaken the most detailed study, and the greatest number of scholarly publications and commissions dealing with women's place and functions. *

Yet all our study has led to little action. This point is well illustrated by a brief chronology of Anglican documents and actions concerning the ordination of women found below on pages 11 to 13. For more than thirty-five years, churchmen have been calling for further study of the ordination of women. A series of studies have been commissioned, completed, and filed away--apparently forgotten or unread.

The authors of this pamphlet believe that it would further debate on the subject of women in orders if these reports were taken from the shelf and some of their findings arranged in a way that might encourage Episcopalians to read them.

Drawing on our experience as women in preparation for and serving in Holy Orders, we have formulated some of the most frequently-asked questions about the ordination of women. In answer to these questions, we have selected

---

* Revised Interim Report of a Study on the Life and Work of Women in the Church (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1948), p. 18.

direct quotations from four of the most recent documents.

We hope your reading of this pamphlet will move you to form an opinion on the question of women in the priesthood and to seek action based on your conviction. When we consider the history of this question in our Church, we are reminded of a memorable confession of St. Augustine:

> ". . . . whereas You showed me by every evidence that Your words were true, there was simply nothing I could answer save only laggard lazy words: "Soon," "Quite soon," "Give me just a little while." But "soon" and "quite soon" did not mean any particular time; and "just a little while" went on for a long while.*

Questions and Answers on Women in the Priesthood

The sources:

Each quotation is followed by a brief reference to its source, as follows:

Archbishops' Commission:	Women and Holy Orders: Being the Report of a Commission appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, London: Church Information Office, 1966.
Bishops' Committee:	"Progress Report to the House of Bishops from The Committee to Study the Proper Place of Women in the Ministry of the Church, October, 1966," Journal of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, 1967, Appendix 35:4-35.12.

*The Confessions of St. Augustine, Book 8, Chapter V.

Lambeth: The Lambeth Conference, 1968: Resolutions and Reports, London and New York: S.P.C.K. and The Seabury Press, 1968.

Joint Commission: "Report of the Joint Commission on Ordained and Licensed Ministries," Journal of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, 1970, pp. 532-539.

I. Theological Questions

Q: Aren't there strong biblical objections to women in the priesthood?

A:

> Some of the objections rest on a rather literal approach to the Bible and fail to take into account the degree to which the Bible is conditioned by the circumstances of its time. It is not necessary to dwell upon the Creation Story, in which woman is created after man and taken from him, nor be influenced by the fact that women were excluded from the covenant-relation of God with Israel, any more than one would support polygamy or slavery because both have clear sanction in the Old Testament. Nor is one moved by the familiar argument that our Lord chose only men to be his apostles. Any sound doctrine of the Incarnation must take full account of the extent to which Jesus lived and thought within the circumstances and environment of his own time. To deny such facts is to deny the full humanity of Jesus and to subscribe to a grotesque Docetism. Our Lord did choose women as close associates, even if he did choose men as the transitional leaders of the new Israel. The Committee also believes that St. Paul, as well as the authors of *Ephesians* and the Pastoral Epistles, were sharing in the passing assumptions of their own time, as well as advising wise strategy for the First Century Church, in recommending that women keep silent at services, cover their heads, and be subordinate to their husbands; just as St. Paul thought it wise to send a run-away slave back to his master. Much more permanent and basic are St. Paul's words, "There is neither Jew nor Greek . . . slave nor free . . . male nor female; for you all are one in Christ Jesus." (Bishops' Committee, 35.9)

> We find no conclusive theological reasons for withholding ordination to the priesthood from women as such. We think it worthwhile to make the following points:
>
> The appeal to Scripture and tradition deserves to be taken with the utmost seriousness. To disregard what we have received from the apostles, and the inheritance of Catholic Christendom, would be most inappropriate for a Church for which the authority of Scripture and tradition stands high.
>
> Nevertheless the data of *Scripture* appear divided on this issue. St Paul's insistence on female subordination, made to enforce good order in the anarchy at Corinth, is balanced by his declaration in Gal. 3.28 that in the one Christ there is no distinction of Jew against Gentile, slave against free man, male against female.
>
> (Lambeth, p. 106)

Q: Since Christ was male and God is seen as father, can a woman possibly stand in the role of mediator and represent Christ?

A:

Jesus Christ was born a man. Obviously, God's unique child would need to be born either a man or woman; and, again, in a patriarchal culture, only a man could fulfill the role of Messiah, Lord, or Son of God. When one calls God personal, one can mean no more than that human personality is the best clue we have to the nature of God. Perhaps male personality is a better clue than female personality in a masculine-dominated society, but who would presume to project such sexual differentiation upon the very nature of God? The first of the Anglican Articles of Religion states that God is "without body, parts, or passions". To call God "he", implies no more than to call the entire human race "man" or "mankind".

(Bishops' Committee, 35.10)

The element of sexuality in the Godhead and its implication for the sex of the priesthood are complex and debatable matters. We acknowledge God as father and we worship the incarnate Lord as man. No theologian has ever understood this to mean that God is male. There is great significance in the ancient imagery of the bishop or priest as father to his family or as representing Christ the bridegroom to the Church, his bride. This is an image of unquestionable value, a profound pointer to the truth. But the truth to which it points has been expressed with equal power by St Paul in referring to his own relation to the Galatian church as that of a mother again in travail with her children (Gal. 4.19).

(Lambeth, pp. 106-107)

Q: Isn't the tradition of the Church, from Apostolic times, strongly against the ordination of women to the priesthood?

A:

The view that the female is a less true or complete image of God than the male is sometimes still supported by a tradition coming from Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, which holds that woman is an incomplete human being, "a defective and/or misbegotten male". This tradition was based upon the pre-scientific biology which held that woman was an entirely passive partner in reproduction. On this subject, the Rev. Dr. Leonard Hodgson has commented, "We should be unwise to base our theological conclusions on notions of a pre-scientific biology which has never heard of genes or chromosomes."

(Bishops' Committee, 35.10)

It appears that the *tradition* flowing from the early Fathers and the medieval Church that a woman is incapable of receiving Holy Orders reflects biological assumptions about the nature of woman and her relation to man which are considered unacceptable in the light of modern knowledge and biblical study and have been generally discarded today. If the ancient and medieval assumptions about the social role and inferior status of women are no longer accepted, the appeal to tradition is virtually reduced to the observation that there happens to be no precedent for ordaining women to be priests. The New Testament does not encourage Christians to think that nothing should be done for the first time.

(Lambeth, p. 106)

Q: Why should we be concerned about the ordination of women to the priesthood? Is there any good reason for it?

A:

It is pointed out that throughout Christian history there have been moments of re-awakening when institutions, practices and beliefs which have been tolerated for centuries are found to be intolerable or insufficient. Thus it was not till the nineteenth century that society in general came to appreciate the enormity of slavery. In our own century we have come to appreciate the insufficiency of much of the eucharistic teaching of past centuries, a recognition which is seen in a revival of the centrality of the Holy Communion in worship. So, it is argued, are we being led to recognise a basic insufficiency in the traditional attitude of the Church to women and Holy Orders. The inferiority of women, accepted as axiomatic almost up to our own day, and justified by now discredited biological and psychological assumptions, is now seen to be no longer self-evident. Why, it is now asked, should a person, solely on the ground of her having been born female, be debarred from a priestly function and office to which, so she believes, she has the inward calling, and for which she has the natural ability, capacity, and professional qualifications?

(Archbishops' Commission, pp. 10-11)

For, to oppose the ordination of women is either to hold that the whole trend of modern culture is wrong in its attitude toward the place of women in society, or to maintain that the unique character of the ordained ministry makes that ministry a special case and justifies the exclusion of women from it.

(Bishops' Committee, 35.6)

All members of the Body of Christ, both male and female, are called to the work of the ministry. The Holy Spirit gives all members of that Body the power to share with Christ the mission for God and for the world, regardless of their sex.

Every moment that the Church continues categorically to deny either the ordered priesthood or the consecrated episcopate to a person competent to hold those offices in our culture today, because she is a woman, it does far more than exclude one woman from a specific ministry or a specific apostolate. Such a denial is also a continuous signal from the Church that all persons in the category of woman are intrinsically inferior creatures who should also serve only as auxiliaries to men in the general ministry and the general apostolate of all believers. Untold numbers of women within and without the Church are receiving the Church's signals "loud and clear".

(Joint Commission, p. 532)

II. Practical Questions

Q: Are women emotionally and psychologically fit to be priests?

A:

The alleged mental and emotional characteristics of women are said to make them unsuitable to serve as clergymen. Such arguments are never very clear, consistent, or precise. Sometimes, the weakness of women is stressed, despite the fact that women are healthier and live longer than men. Or, it is claimed that women think emotionally rather than rationally and that they over-personalize problems or decisions.

The same sort of arguments could be used to show that women are unfit for almost any business, professional, or public responsibility. They were used against the admission of women to higher education, to the practice of medicine and law, and against women suffrage. They are still being used against the admission of women to the House of Deputies of the General Convention.

None of these negative arguments has been borne out in any other walk of life. Women have proved to be capable, often brilliant, lawyers, statesmen, scientists, and teachers. They have enriched the practice of medicine, and politics have neither been redeemed nor debased by their participation.

As experience has demonstrated, only experience can show the extent to which women might fulfill a useful role in the ordained ministry, as well as ways in which their role might be different from the role of men. Here, as in other callings, women would need to be better than men in order to compete with them.

Emil Brunner states, "It is absolutely impossible to put down in black and white, as a universal rule, which spheres of activity 'belong' to women and which do not. This can only become clear through experience; and for this experience, first of all the field must be thrown open."

Because the field has not been thrown open, any judgment based on the Church's experience with professional women workers is limited and inadequate. With the highest respect for the contributions these women are now making, the Committee is convinced that an absolute bar at the level of ordination has a deterring effect upon the number of women of high quality who enter professional Church work or undertake theological study, and that this same bar places theologically trained women in a highly uncomfortable and anomalous position.

(Bishops' Committee, 35.7)

The disagreements between psychologists point to the fact that the evidence in this sphere is inadequate. The viewpoint tentatively expressed in this chapter is expressed aptly by Erich Fromm, who recognises some masculine and feminine psychological characteristics which are rooted in biological differences but regards these as of little significance in relation to cultural influences and as affording no basis for casting men and women in different rôles in any given society. He says:

'. . . deeper than the *difference* between the sexes is their equality, the fact that men and women are first of all human beings sharing the same potentialities, the same desires, and the same fears. Whatever is different in them on account of their natural differences . . . provides their personalities, which are fundamentally alike, with slight differences in the emphasis of one or another trend, an emphasis which appears empirically as a colouring.'

(Archbishops' Commission, p. 59)

Q: Could a woman possibly combine marriage and priesthood?

A:

First, it must be said that many women choose careers and never marry, others combine marriage and careers. The Church recognizes that the latter is an entirely legitimate vocation, both in the secular world and in the Church itself.

Secondly, the question of married women is partly answered by the fact that married men are permitted to serve as bishops, priests, and deacons in the Anglican Communion. Such permission implies an acknowledgment of the strong claims that the wife and family of a married clergyman rightfully have upon his time, his money, and the conduct of his vocation. All would grant that a clergyman has a duty, as well as a right, to take into account his wife's health, or his children's education, in considering a call, in negotiating about his salary, in determining his standard of living and the amount of money he will give away.

While other, and perhaps more serious, problems might exist for a woman who wished to combine ordination with marriage, the Commission is by no means convinced that such a combination would not prove practical in many instances. Even such demanding professions as teaching and medicine are finding ways of using skilled and trained married women with children, both on a part-time and a full-time basis. Many intelligent women find that they are better wives and mothers by combining an outside calling with the care of a family. Many also can look forward to years of full-time professional work after their children are grown.

(Bishops' Committee, 35.8)

Q: Are women capable of handling leadership roles in the Church? Can they gain the respect of both men and women?

A:

The experience of other Churches shows that once congregations are used to a new situation they readily accept a full ministry of word, sacrament, and pastoral care exercised by an ordained woman. In fact, the personal capacities looked for in priesthood are evidently to be found in women as well as in men. The Churches which already accept women for ordination have not so far found the preponderance of men in leadership roles basically altered, while they have learned to welcome the different gifts brought by women who have been called and chosen. In any case many responsible women (such as heads of religious communities) are already performing without question functions of headship, spiritual counsel, and pastoral care in the Church.

(Lambeth, p. 107)

Too much in the past the priestly office has been depicted as one of leadership or authority, and therefore more suited to males than females. Now, the priesthood is more and more seen to be that of service. Women are as eligible as men for such an office.

(Archbishops' Commission, p. 29)

Q: Would the laity accept women as priests?

A: In countries and continents where women have already won acceptance as doctors and lawyers, and in business, politics, and education, their acceptance as ordained ministers of word and sacrament may well prove easier than in areas where tradition and custom still confine most women to the home. The Church should take appropriate steps to educate its members to think constructively about the issues.

(Lambeth, p. 108)

Q: Do women want to be ordained as priests?

A: Finally, one cannot place much weight upon the common opinion that women themselves do not wish to be ordained. Who knows? Most women obviously do not, just as most men do not wish to become clergymen. But some women do. Kathleen Bliss has written, "This is not a woman's question, it is a Church question." The Church's answer must be determined, not primarily by what is good for woman, but what is good for the Church.

(Bishops' Committee, 35.11)

Q: Why do people resist the idea of the ordination of women to the priesthood?

A: The Commission is also aware that all the intellectual arguments against the ordination of women are connected with and reflect strong emotional and psychological pressures. These pressures *may* point to profound truth about men and women and their relationship to each other. Or, they *may* reflect magical notions of priesthood and Sacraments that linger on in the most sophisticated minds. Or, they *may* reflect the fact that our deepest emotional experiences in the life of the Church, experiences often associated with the birth and baptism of children, maturity and Confirmation, worship and Sacraments, the pastoral ministry in times of crisis, joy and sorrow, are all closely associated with an episcopate and a priesthood that is exclusively male. Or, they *may* illustrate the sad fact that historical and psychological circumstances frequently make the Church the last refuge of the fearful and the timid in a changing world and that, the more rapidly the world changes, the stronger become the pressures to keep the Church safe and unchanged. Or, they *may* represent a threat to the present ordained ministers, to their wives, to lay men or lay women. The Commission is disturbed by the scorn, the indifference, the humorless levity, that is occasioned by the question of seating women in the House of Deputies, let alone their admission to ordination.

(Bishops' Committee, 35.10)

III. Ecumenical Considerations

Q: How would the ordination of women to the priesthood affect our ecumenical relations with other church bodies?

A:

> The question is being discussed in many parts of the Anglican Communion. . . . The initiation of a study of the experiences of ordained women was urged by the World Conference on Church and Society, meeting at Geneva in the Summer of 1966. In this country, the Consultation on Church Union has reached the point of considering the drafting of a plan of union, involving this Church and a number of others that now admit women to the ordained ministry, and the question of the ordination of women in such a united Church obviously must be faced as the negotiations proceed.
>
> Nor does it seem that the question of the ordination of women in the Orthodox and Roman Churches can be regarded as finally and forever decided in the negative, particularly in view of other changes that have occurred, especially in the Roman Church.
>
> There is a sentence in one of the official documents of Vatican II that reads, "Since in our times women have an ever more active share in the whole life of society, it is very important that they participate more widely also in the various fields of the Church's apostolate." (*The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott, S. J., General Editor. Guild Press, New York. 1966, page 500.) The Archbishop of Durban, South Africa, Dr. Dennis Hurley, recently predicted that "there are going to be some fantastic developments" in the role of women in the Church. (See *Christian Century*, September 15, 1966.) And in an interview with the Secretary of this Committee, given on October 11, 1966, the Rev. Dr. Hans Küng, Professor in the University of Tübingen (Germany) stated, "There are two factors to consider regarding the ordination of women to the Sacred Ministry of the Church. The first is that there are no dogmatic or biblical reasons against it. The second is that there are psychological and sociological factors to be considered. The solution to the problem depends on the sociological conditions of the time and place. It is entirely a matter of cultural circumstances."
>
> (Bishops' Committee, 35.5-35.6)*

---

*It must be pointed out that this assesment--while it is the most recent comment from an official American Episcopal Church study group--is already out of date. The rapid changes taking place in church order and ecumenical relations today require almost constant review. It is important to note, for example, that the recent admission of women to Holy Orders in Anglicanism does not seem to have affected adversely our relations with other Catholic Churches. Some recent developments with bearing on the question of women in Holy Orders include:

--The admission of women to the ordained ministry in the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America (1970).

--The ordination of women to the diaconate in several Anglican provinces, inlcuding the United States (1968-1972).

--The publication of A Plan of Union for the Church of Christ Uniting advocating the inclusion of women in all branches of ministry (1970).

--The ordination of women as priests in the Anglican synod of Hong Kong and Macao (1971)

--Renewed interest in the status of women by the Synod of the Roman Catholic Bishops meeting at the Vatican (1971).

Chronology of Major Anglican Documents and Actions Concerning Women in Holy Orders

*Documents and actions of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America

1862 Ancient order of deaconesses restored in Anglicanism when Bishop of London orders a deaconess with the laying on of hands.

*1885, 1887 Bishops of Alabama and New York order deaconesses with the laying on of hands.

*1889 General Convention authorizes the "setting apart" of deaconesses by canon.

1919 The Ministry of Women, report of a commission appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury to reconsider the office of deaconess, published in England.

1920 Lambeth Conference (the regular meeting of all Anglican Bishops held every ten years) resolves that "ordination of a deaconess confers on her holy orders."

1930 Lambeth Conference withdraws the assertion that deaconesses are in holy orders.

1935 Report of a commission on the ministry of women appointed by Canterbury and York published in England. Finds no compelling theological reasons for or against the ordination of women, but affirms the male priesthood "for the Church to-day."

1944 Bishop R. O. Hall of Hong Kong ordains Ms. Li Tim Oi to the priesthood. Canterbury and York repudiate the ordination and the Rev. Ms. Li Tim Oi resigns her orders.

1948 Lambeth Conference denies Hong Kong's request for permission to order women as priests on an experimental basis on the grounds that "the time has not come" to consider the matter. Lambeth urges renewed emphasis on the role and work of deaconesses.

*1965 The Rt. Rev. James Pike, Bishop of California, declares that deaconesses are within the diaconate and recognizes Deaconess Phyllis Edwards as a deacon by virtue of her prior ordination as deaconess. In a ceremony in San Francisco, he confers on

her the New Testament and stole, historic marks of the diaconate.

*1966 House of Bishops receives report it commissioned on "The Proper Place of Women in the Ministry of the Church." The House of Bishops recommends that the Lambeth Conference of 1968 study the question of the ordination of women to the priesthood.

1966 Women in Holy Orders, report of the Archbishops' commission to study the ordination of women in preparation for Lambeth 1968, published in England.

1968 Lambeth conference refers question of the ordination of women to the priesthood to the provinces of world Anglicanism for further study. Lambeth endorses principle that deaconesses are within the diaconate. Anglican bodies (e.g., Hong Kong Kenya, Korea, Canada) begin ordaining women to the diaconate.

*1969 Special General Convention (South Bend) changes canon so that women may be licensed to be lay readers and to administer the chalice.

*1970 General Convention (Houston) declares deaconesses to be within the diaconate. Convention changes canon on deaconesses to permit women to be ordained deacons under the same regulations as men.

*1970 Joint Commission on Ordained and Licensed Ministries reports to General Convention (Houston) and recommends that all orders of ministry--diaconate, priesthood, episcopacy--be opened to women immediately. Report rejected by narrow margin in the clergy order in the House of Deputies.

*1970 Triennial Meeting of Episcopal Church Women (Houston) considers the report of the Joint Commission on Ordained and Licensed Ministries and votes to endorse the report by a margin of 222-45.

1971 Anglican Consultative Council (world Anglican body of clergy and laity meeting between Lambeth Conferences) declares that it "will be acceptable" if a bishop ordains women priests with the consent of his province (or synod, in the case of Hong Kong).

*1971 House of Bishops votes to commission a study of the ordination of women in preparation for considering the question at the Fall, 1972, meeting.

1971 Bishop Gilbert Baker of Hong Kong and Macao, acting with the approval of his synod, ordains two women to the priesthood: the Rev. Jane Hwang Hsien-Yuen and the Rev. Joyce Bennett.